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The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
J. H. OLDHAM

No. 78 APRIL 23RD, 1941

DEAR MEMBER,

The Pope's Easter message reflects the perplexity and powerlessness in which the Christian mind seems to be imprisoned in the presence of so complete a denial of Christ as the fury and destructiveness of war.

He appeals for a "new fraternal solidarity" between the nations. But how can this be achieved, if one party, not only does not want it, but openly repudiates it as an end ; if it definitely proclaims itself a *Herrenvolk*, which other peoples must serve as slaves ; if its conception of the new social order is that of a master class and a slave class—of masses controlled by an élite by the twin methods of cajolery and terror ? If this war were a war between peoples the Pope's words would be relevant. But if what the democracies are fighting for is to keep alive the *possibility* of fraternal solidarity, how can that end be achieved except by the defeat of the Nazi regime ? It is true that there is much of the *Herrenvolk* in the attitude of Anglo-Saxons towards other races. This is a wrong that needs to be put right. But there is all the difference in the world between failure in practice, however lamentable, and the deliberate adoption of falsehood as a creed. In the long run false doctrines are infinitely more dangerous than wrong actions.

We are grateful to the Pope for telling us in plain words that the present conflict has assumed a form that can only be described as atrocious ; that repeatedly the limits have been exceeded of what might be permissible in a just war ; that increasing embitterment in the use of means of attack must soon transform the war into an inconceivable horror.

Let us weigh well these grave words. Let us acknowledge and fulfil the duty of exerting such influence as we have on the side of moderation and restraint. Let us face the fact that what we are compelled to do to the German people is in its effect on the lives of individuals contrary to the Will of God. But let us also not flinch from the truth that it is no less contrary to His Will to make peace in the public sphere with iniquity and to surrender the life of mankind to a moral and spiritual evil more terrible than the physical sufferings of war. That is the inescapable dilemma of the Christian conscience and we must not shrink from being tortured by it. It is out of such spiritual agony that a new birth will come in God's time.

BREAKING THE ENTAIL

But to feel our helplessness in the presence of forces beyond the control of the individual is no reason for inaction. Easter is the assurance that in the unending struggle between good and evil, in which man's life is set, the last word is with good. The counter-offensive against the powers of darkness is always open to us, and no man can tell in what ways God can use the faithfulness of a single soul. To do each day what is given to us, to cast fear to the winds, to encourage the faint-hearted, to bear the burdens of others, to refuse to be beaten, to hope when things seem worst, to rid our hearts of hatred and revenge—the redemptive power of such acts is greater than we know. The war is showing how evil creates evil in an unending chain. The same is true in the relations between persons. Wrong action causes resentment and this in turn provokes new ill-feeling. It is

the opportunity of all of us to break the entail. In so far as Christ lives in us the train of evil reaches an end; it is transmuted by love into good. In the midst of war that process can go on. And only the knowledge that even in time of war that other Kingdom is breaking in upon our lives can enable us to endure in spite of all that is happening around us.

And it is not merely in our immediate neighbourhood that the Kingdom of love may win its silent victories. Bonds of friendship may be forged even in war time between men of different nations and races—between members of allied and even, miracle though it be, of enemy, nations. In the striking supplement we are able to publish this week we have for the first time a detailed account of the way in which Christians in Germany are holding to their faith in the face of overwhelming difficulty and opposition. It comes from a trustworthy source and bears the evidence of its truth on its face. It is a fact of great significance that these small groups of Christians, isolated from the general life, are becoming increasingly aware of the reality of their membership in the oecumenical, world-wide Church of Christ.

From another continent there has come a reminder of the way in which the hearts of American Christians are turning towards us in our time of trial. The following cablegram addressed to the Christian News-Letter reached us last week from a pastor on the Pacific Coast : " Following Communion Service large group Claremont, California, Church sends prayerful assurance bearing your burdens with you."

Yours sincerely,

J. H. Oldham

C.N-L. No. 78—This week's issue brings us to the end of our third six months. A large number of subscriptions now fall due and we are hoping that renewals will equal the high level of last October when out of 2700 subscriptions terminating with News-Letter No. 52, well over 2000 were renewed.

Used Envelopes—We want to thank the many members who continue to return their used C.N-L. envelopes. These are much appreciated though for technical reasons they cannot be re-used for the same member. We have had some inquiries as to whether envelopes other than C.N-L. are of use to us. The answer is—no, because we have not enough spare time to refit these for service. Naturally, any envelope, C.N-L. or not, returned with a blank label on it is a particularly welcome gift.

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NEWS-LETTER
APRIL 23RD 1941

Supplement to
C.N.-L. No. 78

PRESENT CONDITIONS IN THE EVANGELICAL CHURCH IN GERMANY

(From a Correspondent on the Continent of Europe)

These notes tell about meetings with members of a Church whose powers of endurance God has tested harder than others, but to whom He has also granted a special witness to Christ. The attitude of the Christians in a country is characterised by the witness of their Church, the attitude of the Christians themselves, and the structure of their Church. We shall take up these points one by one.

THE WITNESS OF THE CHURCH

Some months before the outbreak of war a witness to Christ whose name is little known abroad died in prison, but it is only now that the process which led to his death has become fully known. He had been imprisoned because, in obedience to the office of the ministry given him by his Lord, he refused to accept the order of the police to leave his congregation, which held fast to him as its pastor. Neither threats, nor physical anguish, nor persuasion could bring this Reformed minister to let go his congregation, in which he saw the Christian post which he must not give up. His firmness and his fearless and repeated testimony to the truth of Jesus Christ among his fellow-prisoners procured him the respect due to a holy man and stirred up the wrath of the prison guardian. Finally his weight became too great for the prison camp, he was confronted with the clear decision, either to renounce his congregation finally and go free or else to be shot. He was told that there was no other way, because the authority of the State imperatively demanded his withdrawal from the camp. The minister chose death without making use of the time given him for reflection, and was shot. A commentator has said that such a death as a witness had only very seldom been granted to any Church for centuries, that faith seldom appeared so clearly as *the* victory that overcomes the world, and that it seldom became so clear how we in our weakness, in the condition of obedience to the Lord Christ, are stronger even than the world power of a powerful State. Such a martyrdom, he said, was a rich blessing for a Church and at the same time a heavy responsibility for it.

Only in very rare cases does it come to such a clear decision between the claim of the Lord and the opposition of evil powers, because God does not often find witnesses who have so firm and simple a stand upon His truth, and because the other powers only reluctantly and occasionally show their hand so openly. But such a witness must bring forth fruit in the Church where it happens; it clarifies the situation by judging the failures of others, and strengthens them by showing the strength with which the Lord equips his faithful servants. Many, very many sermons and prayers disclose less the firm stand of the Christians than their deep fall; the living Church which lives by the Word of God is always the minority. But it is the minority that matters. In this minority preaching and prayer are characterised by great sobriety. The attempt is made to hear and declare in a downright way what the Bible has to say to us. The Biblical text is carefully expounded; and because of that, the preaching circles round Christ, in whom it has its beginning, its centre, and its goal. The powers which are inimical to Christ, and which raise their heads so high, are much less spoken about or contradicted than used to be the case—we are in the midst of a war! Often they are hardly, and indeed often not at all spoken about. But is not even this silence about the totalitarian powers and this absence of the reverence which they desire in itself an eloquent witness? These powers lay claim upon the whole man, body and soul, they expect his reverence; and they must therefore regard anyone as an enemy who passes them over in silence.

Prayer is not offered that the Lord may bless the weapons of the army and grant them victory. God is not implored to execute

judgment upon the enemies of the nation; but He is besought to let His will be done and His grace shine forth in the judgment which war means for all nations. Not infrequently, prayer is offered for all authorities of their own nation, that they may be guarded against evil counsel; and for the Forces, that the Lord may strengthen and maintain them in the faith. In one congregation many prayers are offered for the enemies since they became exposed to the frightful air attacks. A new oecumenical note is being struck in many prayers, even now in the midst of war. Is not such prayer, both in what it says and in what is leaves unsaid, an eloquent testimony to the truth? Certainly it is a much tempted Christian position which reveals itself here,[1] far removed from the martyr-attitude of that minister who so clearly and unyieldingly confronted the lords of the world with the one Lord. But the silence is symptomatic. There is much weakness, human policy, and cowardice in it; and yet we may say that in such sober preaching and prayer at least the knee is not bowed before Baal.

THE ATTITUDE OF THE CHRISTIANS

The calm confidence displayed by men who have positions of responsible leadership in the continuing Church conflict, and therefore live in the greatest insecurity and danger, is most striking. In the midst of the most violent temptation steadfast Christians are still living confident in their Lord. Other Christians, who have not to bear the burden of ecclesiastical responsibility, also know how dangerous it is to-day to be a faithful Christian.

About fifty students recently came together from a university half depopulated by war. As many men students are in the Forces, there was a majority of women students. There were far more students of medicine and literature than of theology. That was not a matter of chance, but the result of the frightful shrinkage of the number of theological students. In the current term, only thirty-nine students have begun to study theology throughout the whole country. These young theological students form the core at the universities round which the Christian students crystallise. Many freshmen have already done splendid missionary work in the midst of the organisations of the totalitarian State; and not a few of them have, while doing this work, encountered not only a great deal of mockery and resistance, but also many open doors, understanding and serious inquiry. When a general heard from one student that he was studying *evangelical* theology, he said: "My boy, you are going on a difficult road: may God bless it!" Some weeks later, thirty of his comrades in the "work service" went with this young man to Church. A girl voluntarily stayed for a second six months in her "work service" because she wanted to carry further a piece of Bible Study with her companions which had begun fruitfully.

Some of the students were in uniform, soldiers and officers on leave. What the soldiers told of their experiences as Christians in the army did not produce a uniform picture. In general the convictions of the Christians are not attacked by their comrades and superiors. Often they can bear witness to their Lord, and often preach if no army chaplain is available; but as a rule the atmosphere in the military associations is too unspiritual and too much influenced by the law of the service, to make many spiritual conversations possible. Being a soldier in this country does not seem a problematical thing in principle; it is usually taken unreflectingly for granted. There have only been an infinitesimal minority of conscientious objectors, and our Anglo-Saxon friends must realise that even the militant Christians almost all recognise the right of the State to the armed service of its citizens. From this standpoint the conclusion is drawn that any one who is a soldier is subject to the ethical law of the army and therefore has to be a good soldier. In the conscious Christians, this thought-process is carried out more thoroughly, and so often results in a more energetic will to service than in the minds of thoughtless people. The consideration whether this particular war is justified does not, as a rule, have any influence on the acceptance of the *principle* of the duty of military obedience; even from good soldiers very independent judgments concerning the question of the rights and wrongs of this war can be heard. These Christian soldiers would be very much astonished if any one cast doubts on the genuineness of their Christian conviction because of theire attitud to war.

Many readers who belong to the Reformed Church will object to this double life as a Christian and a soldier, and will see the

[1] The writer is evidently referring to the temptation to take the line of least offence and to resist Nazi paganism by silent non-participation rather than open denunciation.

spectre of Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms looming up behind it. At any rate, many of these strange soldiers have stood the test as servants of God in afflictions, in distress, in imprisonment, and they would be ready for such service again any day, if they believed that the Lord required it of them. On the other hand, we do not fail to see that this question of the attitude of the Christian to war expresses a very serious crisis—the demonic crisis of law. It appears indeed as though the realm of the law had fallen into the hands of the demonic powers, and as though even the Christians who desire to direct their lives by the commandments of God and by His justification are often paralysed in their attitude to the law in what we should describe as a demonic way. At the student meeting, this crisis was brought up for open discussion in an address on "Public Witness to the Ten Commandments": and the helpless silence of Christians and of the Church in face of bad cases of disobedience and mockery of the commandments was admitted and confessed as a serious sin. In this distress and acknowledgement of guilt they all went together in deep humiliation to Holy Communion, and received from the Lord the gift of justification.

It is a great thing in this anguished world to meet people who are of good cheer because they have heard the word of Jesus: "In the world ye have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world." These are people of whom Jesus' word is true: "They are not *of* the world, even as I am not of the world." But we ask: Are these people always aware that the Christian position is also determined by the mission the Lord has given them *in* the world, of which He says: "As thou didst send me into the world, even so send I them into the world" —into an enemy world as messengers of Christ? Now, the spirit of the Church *militant* (ecclesia militans) has not died out among these Christians; but there seems to to be a growing number of Christians who are content with a Church *worshipping* (ecclesia adorans). One sometimes comes across a kind of serene, almost self-assured eschatology, which looks down upon the world and its rulers with the smiling superiority of the victor who knows better. Many seek refuge in the liturgy, many seek peace in a kind of sacramental ontology; for them and others, the evangelical Church is too poverty-stricken, too humiliated, not full enough of the glory of God and also not authoritative enough, and so not a few people are attracted by the majestic building within whose firm walls the old Roman mother-Church seems to promise to tortured consciences the assurance of real peace. The defiant type of hymn, inspired by the spirit of the Reformers, which was sung in the first years of the Church conflict, seems to be dying away and giving place to a type of religious poetry, which is certainly very rich and beautiful, but which dwells with adoring admiration upon the wonders of the Divine Creator and Father. Are not such movements and tendencies attempts to escape from the hard controversy with the world? Is there not here again the temptation to an other-worldly quietism which seems to accompany every Church which is confronted with the totalitarian claims of powers of this world in a cruelly harsh way? May not the calm security of the Christian position be bought at the price of such errors and such escapes? Even when one feels closely bound up with a hard-tried Church, and so would be glad to point out the features in it which show that this Church is walking in the way of God's promise, it would yet be a sin against the commandment of truth if one did not pay just as much attention to its questionable features.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE CHURCH

The destruction of Church organization and Church authorities, the forbidding of Church publicity, and the thrusting of a large part of Church work into the catacombs, means a distress and tribulation for Christian people of whose burden it is extraordinarily difficult for Christians in other countries, where freedom of preaching and worship is not limited, to gain an adequate picture.

Most of the signs point to the fact that the process of destroying the organization and external form of the Church and limiting freedom to preach has gone straight on even during the war. The fighting methods of the holders of totalitarian power and their servitors within the Church may change; the fundamentally hostile attitude toward the Church remains the same. Only a few more ministers have been arrested; those who have been in prison for a long time have as a rule, however, not been set free. On the other hand, a wide use is made of dismissals of ministers from their parishes and other fields of activity, and also of such measures as prohibition to preach or speak

in public. The Church press presents a sorry picture; it is forced to publish news items and articles whose publication in these organs is meant to discredit the reliability and seriousness of the Church. This policy also aims at isolating individual congregations and if possible individual Christians from one another. It is difficult for Church leaders and congregations to find and make use of effective defence measures. They must endeavour to ensure the continuance of the ministry of preaching even when ministers are lacking. This purpose is served by the actively-pursued training and preparation of lay people for Church service. Lay people are beginning to lead worship services, the leadership of congregational groups of lay people is becoming more frequent ; Bible meetings are often led by lay people. The Church leaders help by preparing material and syllabi for these lay leaders. Thus the laity is obtaining new significance, or is recovering the important place it had in the primitive Church.

These obstacles, and the partial destruction of the central leadership of the Church, are leading to a growing transference of the centre of gravity of Church life to the individual congregation. The individual congregation is more and more becoming the form in which the *Ecclesia* expresses its life. This Church is beginning in an astonishing way to take on certain features of the early Christian Church. This is a tendency to which the Church throughout the world should give full attention.

What is beginning to happen here in one country will, unless all the signs are deceptive, also determine the way which the Church will have to go in neighbouring countries too. The far-reaching withdrawal of power from the regional Church authorities who hitherto played the greatest part in fulfilling oecumenical responsibilities must lead to a new consciousness on the part of the individual congregation that it is an *immediate* member of the world-wide Church and as such has an oecumenical responsibility. We are only at the beginning of this development; it has hardly come to the surface of consciousness as yet; it is, however, already a reality. The remark was made above that prayer had in many cases begun to sound a new, warm oecumenical note. News from the world-wide Church meets with living interest, and is thankfully received by Church people as something which strengthens their own Christian position. In such signs, however isolated they may still be, a great promise is beginning to dawn: the little Church, the communion of saints, is beginning to become conscious of its membership in the "Holy Universal Christian Church" in the midst of the darkness of war and the black-out of truth by the powers of this world.

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The Church and the Christians whose strength and weaknesses are described here send a message to their sister Churches and brother-Christians outside in the world-wide Church. As these Christians are, in faithfulness and weakness, endeavouring to guide their own Christian position by God's Word, we shall interpret them rightly if we summarise their message to the whole Church in a word of the Apostle Paul : "Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall." There is passing over the world a judgment upon all those whose Christian position consists in a presumptuous "thinking" that they "stand"; and a promise shines out in this dark world for all those who obediently stand on the one foundation which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

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